RPG Reload File 027 – 'Avernum: Escape From The Pit'
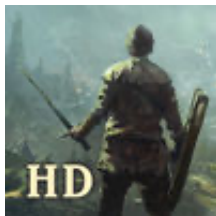
February 26, 2015 by Shaun Musgrave

Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where nothing is so unimportant that it doesn't go into our inventory. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how it's holding up. It's a chance to revisit the game, reflect on the things it does well, and take a deeper dive on it. I try to balance the schedule so that there's a wide variety of RPGs featured, but I need your help with that. Once per month, I let the readers decide what I'm going to play. Simply tell me the game you'd like to see me play and write about by commenting below, posting in the Official RPG Reload Club thread in the forums, or tweeting me at @RPGReload. The next reader's choice article is next week, so any suggestions you make right now will go towards the April selection. Next week's game is *Phantasy Star 2* (Free), a suggestion from reader Jesse_Dylan. Thanks for the idea!

This week, we're looking at *Avernum: Escape From The Pit* ($9.99) from Spiderweb Software. It's a game with more history behind it than you might think at a glance. Released on Mac in late 2011, with Windows PC and iPad versions following a few months later, it's a remake of *Avernum*, released in 2000, which itself was a remake of the 1995 game, *Exile: Escape From The Pit*, Spiderweb Software's first release. Spiderweb Software has been consistently releasing indie RPGs for almost 20 years, a remarkable achievement all on its own. *Ultima* did not survive, *Wizardry* somehow transformed into a largely Japan-only niche series, Interplay and Black Isle

are both essentially past-tense, and even Bioware seems to be less interested in the kind of games they used to make. Spiderweb Software, on the other hand, is still here, and the company doesn't look to be going anywhere.

Let's cut past the company's name, for a second. Spiderweb Software really only has two employees: Jeff Vogel, who makes the games, and his wife Marian Krizsan, who seemingly wears just as many hats on the business and support side as Jeff does on the development side. Vogel has often mentioned how he has felt compelled to keep making games, and it must be quite a compulsion, because the company has released more than 20 games in its 20 years of existence. It's even more impressive when you realize that when Spiderweb Software started, things were very different for indie developers compared to today. When *Exile: Escape From The Pit* launched,

the Internet itself was still getting its footing, with services like the App Store and Steam sitting firmly in the realm of science-fiction. The years pass by, but no matter how things change, Vogel keeps doing what he feels he has to, and that's a wonderful thing for RPG fans.

Going all the way back to the first game, Spiderweb's RPGs have often been described as low-budget (or as we say today, indie) *Ultima* homages. As the *Ultima* series has more or less ceased to be, Spiderweb's games are now perhaps more valuable and essential than ever. The first *Exile* game was made by Vogel while he was in graduate school working on his Masters in Applied Mathematics. On his website, he describes it as something he did to stay sane. I guess it worked. This game had a top-down look to it similar to most of the *Ultima* games, and after it proved successful, it was followed by two sequels that expanded the world and story, along with one non-canon entry. The latter included a scenario creation kit, allowing ambitious fans to create their own adventures in the *Exile* engine.

The *Exile* series was followed by *Nethergate* in 1998, which introduced a new engine with an isometric point of view similar to the Infinity Engine that powered *Baldur's Gate*. This new engine was used to remake the *Exile* games under the name *Avernum* from 2000 to 2004. The remakes introduced a lot of new content along with the improved presentation, providing groundwork for the series to continue into a second trilogy that continued the story. Spiderweb developed a number of other RPGs during this time, which we will hopefully have an excuse to go into in future articles, but the relevant point for now is that after *Avernum 6* ($6.99) was completed in 2009, Vogel was inspired to go all the way back to the first one and start remaking them again. The first result of those efforts is today's game, *Avernum: Escape From The Pit*. It was followed by *Avernum 2: Crystal Souls*, which recently released on Mac and Windows and should make its way to iPad fairly soon.

While these games have a reputation for being budget games, that's really only true to the extent of the presentation, and even then, they're not that bad. The animation in *Avernum: Escape From The Pit* is a little stiff, some visual elements are inconsistent, and there's an overall lack of variety in graphics and audio compared to big-budget games, but what's here looks and sounds pretty good all around. More importantly, at least in my opinion, the gameplay is incredibly high-class. *Escape From The Pit* basically gives you a big, giant RPG sandbox to play in. There's probably some kind of intended order you're meant to do things in, but you are truly free to do whatever the heck you want to. The game even goes so far as to offer you three different main quests to pursue either individually or together. There aren't many RPGs like this being made today, and its scale far exceeds most of the classic RPGs that took a similar approach.

I'm getting a little ahead of myself, though. By jumping ahead to what excites me about the gameplay, I'm selling the world-building short, and it deserves better than that. In *Escape From The Pit*, you play as four adventurers who live in a world under serious oppression from an evil Empire. You've done something to end up on their bad side, so at the start of the game, you're banished to the underworld. A lot of people have crossed the Empire, it seems, because the underworld, called Avernum, is a bustling place filled with towns, factions at odds with each other, and a whole functioning economy and government. The sun does not shine here, and the plants that grow are oddly-shaped. Most people live on the fungus that grows plentifully, along with the occasional mercy package from the Empire sent down along with each group of exiles. It's a huge place, and there are lots of people and places to get familiar with. You can go anywhere, but you're told almost immediately that you shouldn't expect to escape. Doing so is naturally one of the main goals, but there are other things to concern yourself with if you're interested. You'll find events all over the place, many of which have nothing to do with any of the main plots. They're just there to build a believable world.

It's very effective at that particular aspect. Towns really do feel lived in, dungeons seem like dangerous places full of mysteries, and fortresses come off like they've actually been designed to keep intruders out. NPC dialogue offers up all kinds of things that help flesh out the world, with enticing hints towards possible adventures and a lot of individual quirks sprinkled generously throughout. Of course, since this is a remake, Spiderweb had the benefit of knowing exactly where the story would eventually go in later games, allowing for the addition of some great layering in this opening chapter. The world of Avernum is simply a fantastic setting. It's familiar enough that you aren't overwhelmed with lore just to get comfortable, but it's also alien enough to ignite your explorer's spirit. You end up pushing the boundaries because you sincerely want to find out more about this strange place. That's not an easy thing to pull off, and it's arguable that it's one of the main reasons the series has so many fans.

Luckily, the gameplay supports that desire to see the world. As I've already talked about, you have a lot of freedom in *Escape From The Pit*. That's not to say you can go waltzing around like you own the place, as there are dangerous enemies to be found in almost any corner of the world, but you're actually quite free to go to those places whenever you like, if you think you can survive. That freedom extends to your character builds, as well. While you can choose default classes that will set you up with certain stats, skills, and perks from the start, you can also build characters from scratch. Moreover, whether you rolled defaults or made your own, where they go from there is completely up to you. Any character can learn anything, with the only limit coming from a cap on the total number of points you can gain towards improving skills. Even if you do a poor job of developing your characters, the fact that the game allows you to adjust the difficulty setting on the fly means you'll still probably be able to win. It's a nice safety net that
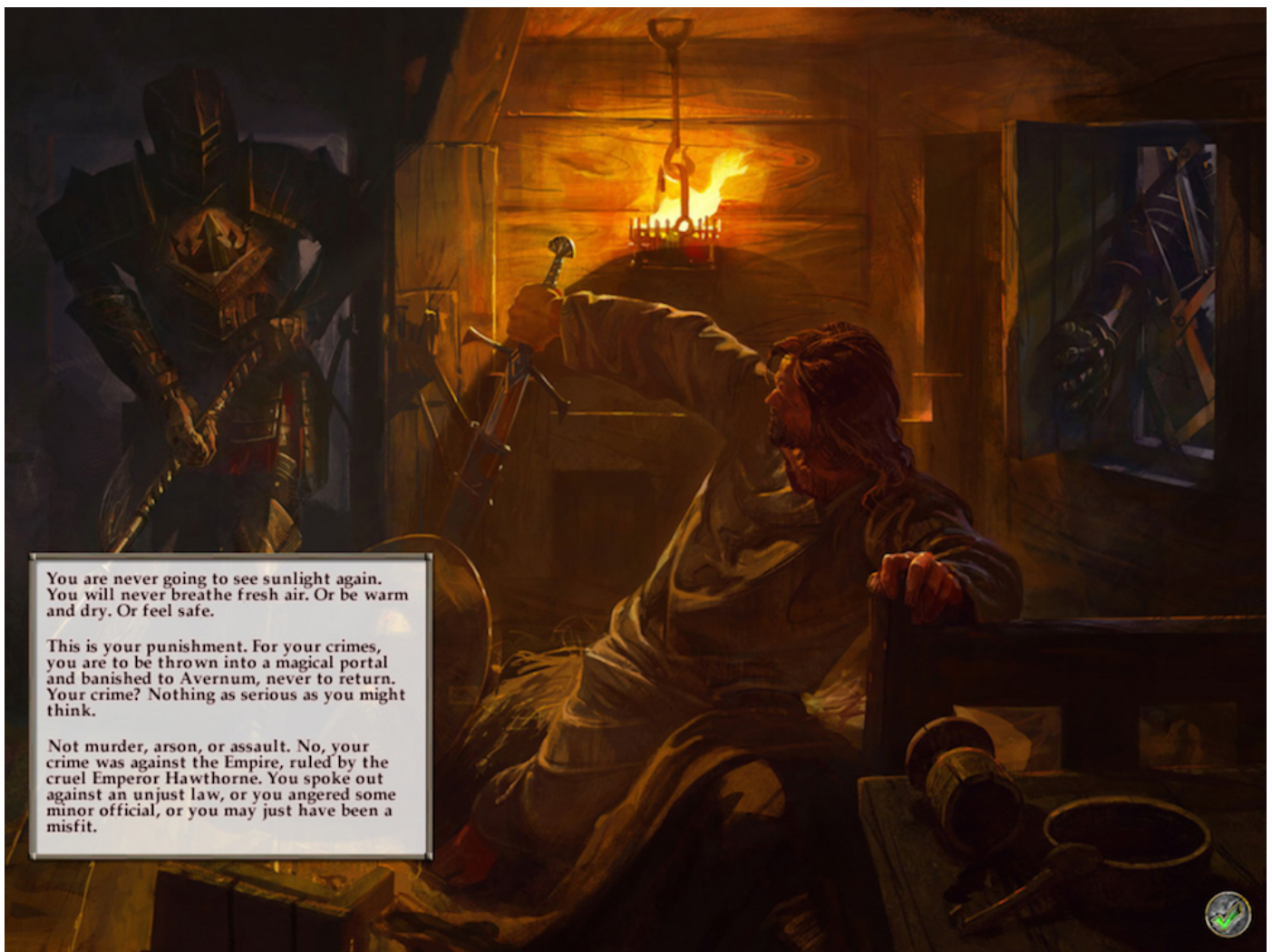
helps curb some of the anxiety of trying character builds outside of the norm.

This was actually my first time playing any of Spiderweb's games, and I'm absolutely over the moon with the game. I play a lot of RPGs, as you dear people can see on a pretty regular basis, and while I can find things to enjoy in almost any of them, it's rare for one to take hold of me the way this one did. I would become so absorbed in it that hours passed by without my notice, and turning it off before going to bed only resulted in me dreaming about what might lie around the next corner of the dungeon I was exploring. Sure, the combat is definitely meat and potatoes stuff, but it works well enough. Everything else, though? Just incredible. It's like *The Quest* ($4.99) in that it feels like there are infinite possibilities out there just waiting to be discovered. Whenever you stumble on a new location, you often get that feeling like you've found something you shouldn't have yet. That naturally leads to exploring said location, and yes, sometimes you die, but sometimes you pull off a crazy house-cleaning victory that gives you an amazing feeling of accomplishment.

It's also packed with content, with a sub-quest checklist so plentiful that you're always able to check off one goal or another. You feel like you've made progress even when all you've done is gather up some junk for an NPC somewhere. I enjoy how some of the early quests send you into places that are easy enough to handle in their initial stages, but have some kind of door, secret passage, or stairs that will lead the curious adventurer into a lot of trouble if they dare press their luck. I liked that because it lends a sense of danger even to things that aren't much more than a milk run. This place isn't just here for me to gather up items for a fetch quest. It has a lot more to it, and my fetch quest just happened to have a purpose in some small part of it. That's great dungeon design and wonderful world-building right there. It's all too rare in this genre, where dungeons frequently come off as being deliberately designed as a puzzle for some hero to stumble across and solve.

Although it's a leaner game than *Baldur's Gate* [($9.99)](#) in a lot of ways, I had a lot more fun playing *Avernum: Escape From The Pit* than I did with [my recent foray into Bioware's classic](#). Part of that is owing to this game's relative lack of horrible bugs compared to the iOS port of *Baldur's Gate*, for certain. I also appreciate how quickly *Escape From The Pit* lets you get into things, though. As much as I love *Baldur's Gate*, it's a fairly story-heavy game with a lengthy tutorial that isn't a whole lot of fun. You can go and do whatever you want after that, but the game strongly encourages you to stay focused. This game has a tutorial as well, but it's over and done with quite quickly. After that, the game kicks you off the rails and lets you do whatever you will. I don't know that this loose, open structure would work for everyone, but it definitely appeals to my sensibilities. I wasn't able to complete the game before I had to write this article, even with a strong head start, but that's more a consequence of how much is here than anything else. Perhaps, knowing my time limitations, I should have had my eyes on the prize and went right for the fastest route to the end, but I didn't want to. The richness of this game lies in doing just the opposite of that, so I think I actually got a more meaningful slice of the game doing things the way I did.

You are never going to see sunlight again. You will never breathe fresh air. Or be warm and dry. Or feel safe.

This is your punishment. For your crimes, you are to be thrown into a magical portal and banished to Avernum, never to return. Your crime? Nothing as serious as you might think.

Not murder, arson, or assault. No, your crime was against the Empire, ruled by the cruel Emperor Hawthorne. You spoke out against an unjust law, or you angered some minor official, or you may just have been a misfit.

The only real downers I ran into with *Avernum: Escape From The Pit* are likely connected. First, it's an iPad-only game. I'm sure iPhone owners would love to play this, especially those with screens larger than were available when this game was last updated in 2012. After suffering *Baldur's Gate* on a 4-inch screen and playing this game extensively on the iPad, though, I can see why Jeff Vogel has openly passed on the idea. It's hard enough as it is on a full-sized iPad to spot small objects and click on the spots you want your characters to move to. I have no idea how iPad Mini players get on with this game, but I imagine it can be frustrating. The developer would probably have to redesign the UI completely, among other things, which would be a pretty big modification to a game that's basically over and done with. On a similar note, I wish I could zoom in a bit or change camera angles. It's very hard to make out details at times and the perspective often obscures useful information. I suspect this too would be a lot of work, and all things equal, I'd

rather have Spiderweb using their limited resources to make new games than endlessly tinker with old ones. Yes, I'm aware of the humor in saying that in an article about a remake of a remake.

All in all, my first visit to the world of Avernum was a blast. I look forward to diving into the rest of Spiderweb's catalog after I finish this one up. Stories for future articles, I'm quite sure. In the meantime, I've still got a whole lot of reckless fooling around to do in this game. I love when I can show you guys an exciting game you haven't experienced before in the **RPG Reload**, but the other pleasant outcome is when I can find one for myself, and that's just what happened this time around. If you have an iPad, an affection for *Ultima* or any other open-world RPG, and don't have *Avernum: Escape From The Pit*, you should probably correct that. It might not hang with the big dogs in terms of production values, but it can certainly take care of itself in every other respect.

That's just my opinion, though. I want to know what you think of *Avernum: Escape From The Pit*. Has anyone out there played this game in all of its incarnations? Any good (or bad) memories to share about it? I'm a curious fellow, and I love to read people talking about RPGs just as much as I like to write about them. Please leave a comment below, post in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or tweet me at [@RPGReload](#). You can also look forward to the second episode of the **RPG Reload Podcast**, whose main topic is this very game! That should be ready for your listening pleasure early next week, so long as things go according to schedule. As for me, I'll be back next week with *Phantasy Star 2*. Have a great week, and thanks as always for reading!

Next Week's Reload Hint: *No need for hints, it's Phantasy Star 2!*